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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Wagons of Indictment Zohar, Rav Shagar, and the Theology of Betrayal an Addendum on the Nova Festival Massacre: How We Failed Them Spiritually on Simchat Torah

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Abstract

This essay offers a theological-critical reading of the Zohar's interpretation of the wagons (agalot) sent by Joseph to Jacob in Genesis 45:27, arguing that the Zoharic text functions not merely as narrative exegesis but as an indictment of patriarchal failure.

Drawing upon Rav Shagar's post-modern theology of rupture and absence, I contend that the wagons encode an accusation: Jacob sent Joseph into danger without adequate protection, violating the fundamental ethical obligation of levaya (accompaniment) that underlies the law of eglah arufah. This reading challenges hagiographic interpretations of Jacob and instead locates him within a framework of culpable silence—the failure of parental responsibility that generates trauma without recourse to repair.

The essay extends this theological critique to the events of October 7, 2023, when the Nova Music Festival massacre occurred on Simchat Torah while diaspora communities danced in their synagogues, unaware that Israeli youth were being slaughtered in the fields near Re'im.

I argue that our liturgical celebration at that precise moment constitutes a spiritual eglah arufah—a case of blood spilled while the elders were occupied elsewhere. This represents not merely historical tragedy but theological scandal: the absent father replicated in the absent God, the failure of the patriarch mirrored in the failure of the community.

Through integration of Zoharic mysticism, post-Holocaust theology, and contemporary trauma, this essay proposes a hermeneutic of sacred brokenness that refuses premature consolation.

Keywords: Zohar, Eglah Arufah, Rav Shagar, Post-Holocaust Theology, Nova Festival Massacre, October 7, Absent Father Theology, Tzimtzum, Levaya, Patriarchal Failure.

"The Car Wall" — T'kuma Village- a graveyard of damaged cars from the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack that devastated the Nova Music Festival in southern Israel.

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I. Introduction: The Wagons as Woun

The reunion of Jacob and Joseph in the book of Genesis has traditionally been read as a moment of reconciliation and redemption. After twenty-two years of separation, the father who mourned his son as dead discovers that Joseph lives; the spirit that had departed from Jacob returns. "*And Israel said, 'Enough! My son Joseph is still alive. I will go and see him before I die*'" (Genesis 45:28).

Yet the Zohar's reading of this narrative refuses the easy comfort of restored relationship.

In Zohar I:210a-b (Parashat Vayigash), the mystical text transforms the wagons (agalot) Joseph sends to his father into vehicles of moral reckoning. The Aramaic original reads.

כד חמא יעקב עגלאתא דשלח יוסף לאחוהי

"When Jacob saw the wagons that Joseph had sent to his brothers,"

אסתכל בהון וחמא בהון מילתא קדמאה, ההוא מילתא דלא אתתקן

"he looked into them and perceived the earlier matter, the matter that had not been rectified."

אמר יעקב: ודאי האי אות הוא, דהא עגלה איהי ההוא דינא דעגלה ערופה

"Jacob said: surely this is a sign, for the wagon alludes to the judgment of the eglah arufah,"

דלא אתפרש דמיה ומאן חייב בה

"where blood was spilled and responsibility was never clarified."

ויוסף שלח ליה לאבוה למנדע ליה דלא אתבע דינא עד השתא

"And Joseph sent this to his father to make him know that judgment had not yet been demanded."

The linguistic connection between agalot (תולגע, wagons) and eglah (הלגע, heifer) transforms a simple gift of transport into a theological cipher.

The eglah arufah ceremony of Deuteronomy 21:1-9 addresses the case of an unsolved murder: when a corpse is found in the open field and the killer is unknown, the elders of the nearest city must break the neck of a heifer and declare, "Our hands did not shed this blood, neither did our eyes see it" (Deuteronomy 21:7). The ritual is not about guilt in the direct sense but about communal responsibility: the elders attest that they did not send this person away without food or escort into danger (1).

The Zohar's interpretation reverses the conventional reading. Where traditional commentary sees Joseph's wagons as proof of identity—a sign that only Joseph would know—the mystical text sees an accusation embedded in comfort. Joseph is saying: Father, you sent me without food and without escort into the hands of brothers who hated me. You failed the fundamental obligation that the eglah arufah ritual was designed to prevent. The wagons are not merely evidence of Joseph's survival; they are evidence of Jacob's failure.

The classical midrashic interpretation, found in Bereishit Rabbah 94:3 and paralleled in Midrash Tanchuma (Vayigash 11), reads the wagons as a sign of proof and recognition. The midrash relates: "Rabbi Levi said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan bar Shaul: [Joseph] said to [his brothers]: If [Jacob] believes you, fine; if not, tell him as follows: 'When I departed from you, were we not engaged in the parasha of eglah arufah?' Hence it says: 'when he saw the wagons... the spirit of Jacob their father revived'" (בר תישארב מ"ה:צ).

Rashi, commenting on Genesis 45:27, codifies this tradition: "He [Joseph] gave them a sign of what subject he was engaged when he separated from him [Jacob]—and that was the section dealing with

the beheaded heifer (eglah arufah)... and it does not say, 'that Pharaoh had sent'" (זכ:המ תישארב י"שר). This reading emphasizes recognition and spiritual continuity: Joseph proves his identity by referencing their shared Torah study, and Jacob's spirit revives because he knows his son has remained spiritually faithful despite twenty-two years in Egypt.

Yet the Zohar's interpretation reverses this conventional reading. Where the standard midrashic tradition sees Joseph's wagons as proof of identity—a comforting sign that only Joseph would know—the mystical text sees an accusation embedded in comfort.

The Zohar (II:210b) explicitly states that Jacob "sent Joseph without food and without escort" (חלש אייוול אלבו אנוזמ אלב היל), directly contradicting the Yerushalmi's more generous reading that Jacob did accompany Joseph until Joseph himself begged his father to return. Joseph is saying: Father, you sent me without food and without escort into the hands of brothers who hated me. You failed the fundamental obligation that the eglah arufah ritual was designed to prevent. The wagons are not merely evidence of Joseph's survival; they are evidence of Jacob's failure.

2. The Law of the Broken-Necked Heifer: A Ritual of Communal Accountability

Before examining the Zohar's deployment of the eglah arufah imagery, we must understand the biblical ritual itself. The law appears in Deuteronomy 21:1-9.

א כִּי-יִמָּצֵא חָלָל, בָּאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נֹתֵן לְךָ לְרִשְׁתָּהּ: נֹפֵל, בַּשָּׂדֶה; לֹא נוֹדַע, מִי הִכָּהוּ.	1 If one be found slain in the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee to possess it, lying in the field, and it be not known who hath smitten him;
ב וְיָצְאוּ זְקֵנֶיךָ וְשֹׁפְטֶיךָ, וּמָדְדוּ, אֶל-הֶעָרִים, אֲשֶׁר סְבִיבֹת הֶחָלָל.	2 then thy elders and thy judges shall come forth, and they shall measure unto the cities which are round about him that is slain.
ג וְהָיָה הָעִיר, הַקְּרֹבָה אֶל-הֶחָלָל--וְלָקְחוּ זִקְנֵי הָעִיר הַהִוא עֶגְלַת בָּקָר, אֲשֶׁר לֹא-עֻבַּד בָּהּ, אֲשֶׁר לֹא-מָשְׁכָה, בְּעֹל.	3 And it shall be, that the city which is nearest unto the slain man, even the elders of that city shall take a heifer of the herd, which hath not been wrought with, and which hath not drawn in the yoke.
ד וְהוֹרִדוּ זִקְנֵי הָעִיר הַהִוא אֶת-הָעֶגְלָה, אֶל-נַחַל אֵיתָן, אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יֵעָבֵד בּוֹ, וְלֹא יִזָּרֵעַ; וְעָרְפוּ-שָׁם אֶת-הָעֶגְלָה, בַּנָּחַל.	4 And the elders of that city shall bring down the heifer unto a rough valley, which may neither be plowed nor sown, and shall break the heifer's neck there in the valley.
ה וְנִגְּשׁוּ הַכֹּהֲנִים, בְּנֵי לֵוִי--כִּי בָם בָּחַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשָׁרְתוֹ, וּלְבָרֵךְ בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה; וְעַל-פִּיהֶם יִהְיֶה, כָּל-רִיב וְכָל-נָגַע.	5 And the priests the sons of Levi shall come near--for them the LORD thy God hath chosen to minister unto Him, and to bless in the name of the LORD; and according to their word shall every controversy and every stroke be.
ו וְכֹל, זִקְנֵי הָעִיר הַהִוא, הַקְּרֹבִים, אֶל-הֶחָלָל--יִרְחֲצוּ, אֶת-יְדֵיהֶם, עַל-הָעֶגְלָה, הָעֲרוּפָה בַּנָּחַל.	6 And all the elders of that city, who are nearest unto the slain man, shall wash their hands over the heifer whose neck was broken in the valley.
ז וְעָנוּ, וְאָמְרוּ: יָדֵינוּ, לֹא שפכה שָׁפְכָה אֶת-הַדָּם הַזֶּה, וְעֵינֵינוּ לֹא רָאוּ.	7 And they shall speak and say: 'Our hands have not shed this blood, neither have our eyes seen it.
ח כַּפֵּר לְעַמְּךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר-פָּדִיתָ, יְהוָה, וְאַל-תִּתֵּן דָּם נָקִי, בְּקֶרֶב עַמְּךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל; וְנִכַּפֵּר לָהֶם הַדָּם.	8 Forgive, O LORD, Thy people Israel, whom Thou hast redeemed, and suffer not innocent blood to remain in the midst of Thy people Israel.' And the blood shall be forgiven them.
ט וְאַתָּה, תְּבַעֵר הַדָּם הַנָּקִי--מִקִּרְבֶּךָ: כִּי-תַעֲשֶׂה הַיָּשָׁר, בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה.	9 So shalt thou put away the innocent blood from the midst of thee, when thou shalt do that which is right in the eyes of the LORD. (5)

A Body is Found – Deuteronomy discusses the responsibility of Israelites who find the body of a murder victim on public land outside any city or town:

דברים כא:א כִּי יִמָּצֵא חָלָל בָּאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נֹתֵן לְךָ לְרִשְׁתָּהּ נֹפֵל בַּשָּׂדֶה לֹא נוֹדַע מִי הִכָּהוּ:	Deut 21:1 If, in the land that YHWH your God is assigning you to possess, someone slain is found lying in the open, the identity of the slayer not being known,

Measuring – The first responsibility is for the elders[1] to determine which town is closest:

כא:ב וְיָצְאוּ זְקֵנֶיךָ וְשֹׁפְטֶיךָ וּמָדְדוּ אֶל הֶעָרִים אֲשֶׁר סְבִיבֹת הֶחָלָל:	21:2 your elders and magistrates shall go out and measure the distances from the corpse to the nearby towns.

Unyoked Heifer – Once the closest city is determined, the elders of that town must perform a ritual with a heifer that has never been yoked.

כא:ג וְהָיָה הָעִיר הַקְּרֹבָה אֶל הֶחָלָל וְלָקְחוּ זִקְנֵי הָעִיר הַהִוא עֶגְלַת בָּקָר אֲשֶׁר לֹא עָבַד בָּהּ אֲשֶׁר לֹא מָשְׁכָה בְּעֹל:	21:3 The elders of the town nearest to the corpse shall then take a heifer which has never been worked, which has never pulled in a yoke;

The provision requiring an unyoked heifer is found only here and in the law of the red heifer (Num 19:2):

במדבר יט:ב ...וְיִקְחוּ אֵלֶיךָ פָּרָה אֲדֻמָּה תְּמִימָה אֲשֶׁר אֵין בָּהּ מוּם אֲשֶׁר לֹא עָלָה עָלֶיהָ עֹל.	Num 19:2 ...Instruct the Israelite people to bring you a red cow without blemish, in which there is no defect and on which no yoke has been laid.

Elders Kill the Heifer – The elders then break the heifer's neck over an unsown plot of land:

כא:ד וְהוֹרִדוּ זִקְנֵי הָעִיר הַהִוא אֶת הָעֶגְלָה אֶל נַחַל אֵיתָן אֲשֶׁר לֹא יֵעָבֵד בּוֹ וְלֹא יִזָּרֵעַ וְעָרְפוּ שָׁם אֶת הָעֶגְלָה בַּנָּחַל:	21:4 and the elders of that town shall bring the heifer down to an everflowing wadi, which is not tilled or sown. There, in the wadi, they shall break the heifer's neck.

Priests Arrive – Having done this, the Levitical Priests come, though they text does not say what role they have, other than "approaching":

The Mishnah (Sotah 9:6) interrogates the elders' declaration with characteristic directness :

זְקֵנֵי אוֹתָהּ הָעִיר רוֹחֲצִין אֶת יְדֵיהֶן בַּמַּיִם בְּמָקוֹם עֲרֵיפָה שֶׁל עֶגְלָה, וְאוֹמְרִים, (שם) יָדֵינוּ לֹא שָׁפְכָה אֶת הַדָּם הַזֶּה וְעֵינֵינוּ לֹא רָאוּ. וְכִי עַל דַּעְתֵּנוּ עָלְתָה, שֶׁזְּקֵנֵי בֵית דִּין שׁוֹפְכֵי דָמִים הֵן, אֶלָּא שֶׁלֹּא בָא לְיָדֵינוּ וּפְטַרְנוּהוּ בְלֹא מָזוֹן, וְלֹא רְאִינוּהוּ וְהִנַּחְנוּהוּ בְלֹא לְוָיָה. וְהַכֹּהֲנִים אוֹמְרִים, (שם) כַּפֵּר לְעַמְּךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר פָּדִיתָ ה' וְאַל תִּתֵּן דָּם נָקִי בְּקֶרֶב עַמְּךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל. לֹא הָיוּ צְרִיכִים לוֹמַר (שם) וְנִכַּפֵּר לָהֶם הַדָּם, אֶלָּא רוּחַ הַקֹּדֶשׁ מְבַשַּׂרְתָּן, אִימָתַי שֶׁתַּעֲשׂוּ כָּכָה, הַדָּם מִתְכַּפֵּר לָהֶם:

שלא בא לידינו ופטרנוהו ולא ראינוהו והנחנוהו	It is not the case that he came to us and we dismissed him, or that we saw him and let him go.

The subject of בא, "he came" is unclear, and the Jerusalem Talmud (*Sotah* 9:6, 23d) offers two different possibilities:

A) Murderer – The explanation attributed to the rabbis of the Land of Israel (themselves), is that the elders' declaration refers to the murderer. They are affirming that they, the elders, had never apprehended nor even seen the murderer and then subsequently released him or allowed him to escape:

שלא בא על ידינו ופטרנוהו **ולא הרגנוהו** ולא ראינוהו והנחנוהו **ועימעמנו על דינו**.	It is not the case that he [the murderer] came to us and we dismissed him **without execution**, nor did we, **acting irregularly in the judgment of his case**, see him and let him go.

According to this understanding, the ceremony reminds the elders of their responsibility for pursuing justice. If they are lax in their attempt to apprehend and convict a murderer, it is as if they themselves spilled the blood of the victim.

B) Victim – The explanation attributed to the rabbis of Babylonia[5] is that the elders are saying that they were not guilty of having neglected the needs of the murder victim:

שלא בא לידינו ופטרנוהו **בלא מזון** ולא ראינוהו והנחנוהו **בלא לויה**	It is not the case that he [the murder victim] came to us and we let him go **without food** or that we saw him and let him go **without accompaniment** [as he left the city]." [6]

"Could it have crossed our minds that the elders of the rabbinical court are murderers?" The text answers: "*Rather, [they are declaring that] it is not the case that he came to us and we dismissed him without food, or that we saw him and let him go without escort*" (2). The Talmud (Sotah 46b) elaborates that the duty of levaya—accompanying a traveler on the beginning of their journey—is so fundamental that one who fails in this obligation bears moral responsibility for whatever befalls the traveler (3).This understanding suggests that the ceremony reminds the elders and all Jews that they are responsible for the social welfare of the vulnerable. Whenever poverty causes a person's death, the community bears some of the responsibility.

Several scholars have noted the peculiarity of this ritual. David P. Wright observes that the eglah arufah represents a form of sympathetic magic transformed by Israelite theology into a mechanism of communal accountability: The killing of the heifer is either.

> *…a sacrifice, a symbolic or vicarious execution of the murderer, the representation of the penalty the elders will suffer if their confession of innocence is not true, the means of preventing the animal laden with guilt from returning to the community, or a reenactment of the murder which removes blood pollution from the inhabited to an uninhabited area…*

The ritual does not identify the murderer; it transfers pollution from the community by acknowledging collective failure. (4).

As Jacob Milgrom argues, the ceremony addresses not criminal guilt but the stain of unavenged blood upon the land (5). The nea rest city is not accused of murder but of negligence: the failure to create conditions of safety that would have prevented the death.

This distinction between direc t guilt and responsible negligence is crucial for understanding the Zohar's application to Jacob. The patriarch did not sell Joseph into slavery—that was t he brothers' deed. But Jacob sent Joseph into danger with full knowledge of the brothers' hatred.

יד וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ, לֶךְ-נָא רְאֵה אֶת-שְׁלוֹם אַחֶיךָ וְאֶת-שְׁלוֹם הַצֹּאן. וְהָשִׁבֵנִי, דָּבָר; וַיִּשְׁלָחֵהוּ מֵעֵמֶק חֶבְרוֹן, וַיָּבֹא שְׁכֶמָה.

14 And he said to him: 'Go now, see whether it is well with thy brethren, and well with the flock; and bring me back word.' So he sent him out of the vale of Hebron, and he came to Shechem.

טו וַיִּמְצָאֵהוּ אִישׁ, וְהִנֵּה תֹעֶה בַּשָּׂדֶה; וַיִּשְׁאָלֵהוּ הָאִישׁ לֵאמֹר, מַה-תְּבַקֵּשׁ.

15 And a certain man found him, and, behold, he was wandering in the field. And the man asked him, saying: 'What seekest thou?'

"*Go, I pray thee, see whether it be well with thy brethren*" (Genesis 37:14). The text records that Jacob knew the brothers' animosity :

ד וַיִּרְאוּ אֶחָיו, כִּי-אֹתוֹ אָהַב אֲבִיהֶם מִכָּל-אֶחָיו--וַיִּשְׂנְאוּ, אֹתוֹ; וְלֹא יָכְלוּ, דַּבְּרוֹ לְשָׁלֹם.

4 And when his brethren saw that their father loved him more than all his brethren, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably unto him.

"*And when his brethren saw that their father loved him more than all his brethren, they hated him*" (Genesis 37:4). Jacob's sending of Joseph constitutes the precise failure that the eglah arufah ritual was designed to address: releasing a vulnerable person into known danger without adequate protection.

3. The Absent Father as Responsible Party

Traditional Jewish commentary has been reluctant to criticize the patriarchs. The principle of ma'aseh avot siman l'banim (the deeds of the fathers are a sign for the children) typically functions to legitimate rather than interrogate patriarchal behavior. Yet the Zohar's reading of the wagons opens space for a more critical engagement with Jacob's parenting.

The Zohar Vayigash (II:210b) states explicitly that Jacob "sent Joseph without food and without escort" (אייוול אלבו אנוזמ אלב היל חלש). This contradicts the Talmud Yerushalmi's more generous reading, which maintains that Jacob did accompany Joseph until Joseph himself begged his father to return home (6). The Zohar rejects this exculpatory tradition. In the mystical reading, Jacob's failure is complete: he dispatched his beloved son into the hands of those he knew to be hostile, armed only with a multicolored coat that marked him as the favored one—a coat that would serve not as protection but as provocation.

Rabbi Chaim Steinmetz notes that the Zohar's interpretation is "a bitter reminder of Joseph being sent away unaccompanied into obvious danger" (7). The wagons become not tokens of reconciliation but artifacts of accusation. Joseph's choice of symbol over speech—sending wagons rather than explicitly naming his father's failure—represents what we might call the ethics of indirect acknowledgment. Joseph allows Jacob to recognize the wound without public humiliation.

This indirection is itself significant. The Hebrew root y-d-' (to know) appears repeatedly in the Zoharic passage: Joseph sends the wagons "to make him know" (היל עדנמל).

Yet this knowledge is not propositional but experiential. Jacob does not learn new facts; he confronts, perhaps for the first time, the full moral weight of what he already knew. The wagons are mirrors reflecting his own neglect.

Ruth Walfish's illuminates the psychological dimension: "Jacob was plagued by terrible guilt throughout the period of Joseph's absence: why did I send Joseph off alone to his brothers? Why did I not accompany him?" (8).

The wagons offer Jacob "the opportunity to start afresh, to rid himself of the guilt and blame that has haunted him for years, much as the eglah arufah cleanses the community of guilt for the death of the anonymous man" (9). Yet we must note that the eglah arufah does not erase guilt—it acknowledges it. The elders do not claim innocence; they claim that their negligence, whatever it was, did not rise to the level of direct culpability. Jacob's "revival" is not the restoration of innocence but the assumption of responsibility.

4. Rav Shagar and the Theology of Rupture

The Zohar's critical reading of Jacob anticipates the postmodern theology of Rav Shimon Gershon Rosenberg (Rav Shagar, 1949-2007), who developed a distinctive approach to faith after catastrophe. Shagar's theology, rooted in Hasidic sources and inflected by contemporary philosophy, offers a framework for understanding how betrayal can occur through absence rather than malice.

In his collection Kelim Shevurim (Broken Vessels), Rav Shagar argues that the postmodern condition has collapsed the "grand narratives" that once provided meaning (10). Following Jean-François Lyotard's analysis, Shagar contends that we inhabit a world of fractured truths, where no overarching story can claim universal validity. Yet rather than abandoning faith, Shagar finds in this rupture an opening for authentic religious life. Drawing on Rebbe Nachman of Breslov's concept of the halal ha-panui (the void emptied of God's presence), Shagar suggests that faith in a postmodern age must learn to inhabit the absence (11).

This theology of rupture illuminates the Zohar's reading of Jacob. The patriarch's failure was not active malice but something more insidious: the absence of presence when presence was required. Jacob loved Joseph—the text is emphatic on this point—yet love without protection generated trauma. As Shagar writes in his essay "My Faith: Faith in a Postmodern World," modern religious thinkers attempted to isolate faith from the world, creating a "two-world approach" that "fend[s] off modernism's criticism by isolating faith from the world and its values" (12). But this isolation is itself a form of abandonment. Faith that does not engage the dangerous world in which the beloved must journey is faith that has failed its object.

Zohar Maor, editor of Shagar's posthumous works, notes that Shagar "partook of many of Rebbe Nachman's paradoxes, for example that cycle of hope and despair, and his ongoing flirtation with a faith based on the sephira of Ayin, or Nothingness" (13). The Nothingness that Shagar inherits from Breslov is not nihilism but the recognition that presence and absence are intertwined. Jacob's "presence" to Joseph through the gift of the coat was simultaneously an absence: he gave his son visibility among his enemies without giving him protection from them.

Shagar's student Yishai Mevorach has extended this theology into what he calls "the post-secular space and the post-Holocaust space," a "very bleak theology" according to Maor (14). Yet bleakness is not despair. The Zohar's reading of the wagons suggests that confronting failure is itself a form of healing—not because acknowledgment erases the wound but because it refuses the false comfort of denial.

5. Tzimtzum and the Withdrawal of the Protecting Father

The Lurianic concept of tzimtzum—divine self-contraction to create s pace for the world—provides a mystical framework for understanding Jacob's failure. In the Kabbalistic cosmogony of Isaac Luria (1534-1572), God withdrew His infinite light to create a space (halal) in which finite beings could exist. This withdrawal was an act of love, but it was also a n act of risk: the space emptied of direct divine presence became the arena in which evil could operate (15).Hans Jonas, in his post-Holocaust theology, deployed the tzimtzum concept to address the question of divine absence during the Shoah. If God is omnipotent, Jonas argued, He cannot be wholly good, for He permitted Auschwitz. If God is wholly good, He cannot be omnipotent, for He did not prevent it. Jonas resolved this dilemma by positing a God who "divested Himself of His power" in order to grant creation autonomy (16). This self-limitation of God parallels the parent who must release the child into a dangerous world.

Yet the analogy has limits. The divine tzimtzum, in Lurianic thought, was accompanied by residual light

(reshimu) and the vessels (kelim) that would catch and contain the divine emanation. God withdrew but did not abandon. Jacob's sending of Joseph lacks these protective structures. He contracted his presence without providing any vessel to receive his son in the hostile territory.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, whose theology of divine pathos complements Jonas's emphasis on divine self-limitation, wrote of a God who is the "most-moved Mover"—not the unmoved prime mover of Aristotelian theology but a God who suffers with His creation (17). For Heschel, "the human being is a 'need' of God" (18). This mutual implication of divine and human life means that human suffering affects the divine. When Jacob's failure resulted in Joseph's suffering, the Shekhinah—God's indwelling presence—also suffered.

The Zohar's imagery of wagons and heifers thus encodes a theology of paternal failure that resonates with post-Holocaust Jewish thought. The absent father—whether human patriarch or divine parent—generates a wound that cannot be healed by presence alone. Jacob's "revival" at seeing the wagons is not joy but recognition: the return of repressed knowledge, the acknowledgment of what had always been true.

6. Shagar's Critique and its Limits: Where Rupture Becomes Evasion

While Rav Shagar's theology of rupture provides valuable tools for reading the Zohar's indictment of Jacob, his framework requires critique. Shagar's embrace of postmodern relativism, while liberating in some respects, risks converting theological failure into aesthetic category. If all truths are "subjective," as Shagar sometimes suggests, then Jacob's failure loses its moral weight (19).

Alan Brill, in his analysis of Shagar's thought, notes that the latter's "faith amounts to a mystical piety without truth. It is completely subjectified and thus, it is 'spiritual'" (20). This subjectification, while protecting faith from external critique, also insulates it from prophetic judgment. The eglah arufah ritual is not "spiritual" in this attenuated sense; it is concrete, embodied, and demands action. The elders must break the heifer's neck. The community must confront its failure.

Shalom Carmy's assessment is apt: Shagar is "a master diagnostician of the human soul under postmodernism" but may be "propagating a confusion of diagnosis with remedy" (21). To diagnose rupture is not the same as healing it. The Zohar's reading of the wagons goes beyond diagnosis to prescription: Jacob must recognize his failure before relationship can be restored. This recognition is not a "language game" in the Wittgensteinian sense that Shagar sometimes invokes; it is a moral reckoning with material consequences.

Moreover, Shagar's theology, for all its sophistication, remains largely concerned with the believing subject rather than with those harmed by failed belief. Joseph—the victim of Jacob's negligence—disappears in most readings of the wagons narrative. We focus on Jacob's "revival" without attending to Joseph's twenty-two years of exile. A truly critical theology must attend to the victim as much as to the perpetrator of harm.

ADDENDUM

1. Nova: The Wagons Return — Simchat Torah 2023 and the Spiritual Eglah Arufah

On October 7, 2023—Simchat Torah, the festival celebrating the completion of the annual Torah reading cycle—approximately 3,500 young people gathered at the Nova Music Festival near Kibbutz Re'im in the western Negev desert. The event, officially titled the "Supernova Sukkot Gathering," was billed as a

celebration of "friends, love, and infinite freedom" (22). As the sun rose that Shabbat morning, as the beat pulsed and bodies moved in the grammar of dance, Hamas militants crossed the Gaza border and began their massacre.

The final count was 378 dead at the Nova site alone, including 344 civilians and 34 security personnel. At least 44 were taken hostage. Reports of sexual violence against women and men emerged in the subsequent investigations (23). The attack at Nova constituted the largest civilian massacre in a single location during what would become known as the deadliest day for Jews since the Holocaust.

At the precise moment when bullets tore through dancing bodies in the fields of Re'im, diaspora Jewish communities around the world were beginning their own celebrations. Synagogues from Chicago to London were preparing Torah scrolls for the hakafot, the joyous processions that mark the holiday. We were dancing while they were dying. We completed the Torah cycle while their stories were being brutally interrupted. This coincidence is not merely historical irony. It constitutes a theological scandal that demands the language of eglah arufah. The elders of Deuteronomy 21 declared: "Our hands did not shed this blood, neither did our eyes see it." We in the diaspora can make no such claim. Our hands were wrapped around Torah scrolls when we should have been—what? The question itself exposes the wound.

1.1 A Theology of Over-Presence

In my visit to the Nova site and the devastated kibbutzim of the western Negev, I encountered a geography that resists conventional theological categories (40,44). The road south does not warn you. Eucalyptus, winter wheat, the ordinary grammar of arrival—then the field opens its throat.

Faces rise from soil like a congregation that forgot to leave. Each portrait mounted at the memorial site is a midrash on silence: Here stood breath. Here, rhythm. Here, the body before it learned its own fragility.

The red anemones (kalaniyot) cluster at the bases of the photographs, spreading the way blood does not spread—slowly, with intention, a second spring that knows its season has been renamed. This is not absence. This is over-presence (42). A place where tzimtzum failed, where God did not contract enough to let the human survive the density of what is real (36).

At the car cemetery near Moshav Tekuma, 1,560 vehicles stand stacked like a metal graveyard. Each chassis is a sentence stopped mid-syllable. Doors torn, frames perforated—the punctuation of bullets writing nothing anyone wanted to read. Two black Toyotas sit unburned, gun turrets welded to their backs, placed in the circle like an answer no one asked for.

As a physician, my clinical eye catalogued: heat deformation, blast pattern, penetration depth. But something older intruded—something that does not measure. In the Talmud, stones cry out when blood is spilled (24). Here, steel learns to weep.

1.2 The Absent Father, The Absent God

The God who survives this place is not the God of rescue, not the Shomer Yisrael who guards with outstretched arm. That God did not show. What remained was the other Presence—the one who stays without fixing, who witnesses without redeeming too quickly, who sits shiva in the ash long after the comforters have left (38,41).

The vav is broken here (33). אוּהָ—and He—cracked at the center, the letter that joins learning what it means to hold two fragments that will not fuse. In

the Torah scroll, the vav ketia (broken vav) appears in only one place: the word "shalom" in Numbers 25:12, God's covenant of peace with Phineas (29). The tradition preserves this broken letter, transmitting incompleteness as sacred text.

This broken vav becomes the hermeneutical key for reading both the Zohar's wagons and the Nova massacre. The vav is the letter of connection—it means "and"—the grammatical joint that links subject to predicate, cause to effect, promise to fulfillment. When the vav breaks, connection persists but completion is suspended. Jacob "and" Joseph are reunited, but the reunion is marked by twenty-two years of absence that cannot be undone. The diaspora "and" Israel celebrated Simchat Torah, but the "and" was broken by bullets while we danced.

Melissa Raphael, in her feminist theology of the Holocaust, argues that "the dominant theme of post-Holocaust Jewish theology has been that of the temporary hiddenness of God, interpreted either as a divine mystery or, more commonly, as God's deferral to human freedom" (26). But the Shekhinah tradition offers another possibility: a divine presence that does not intervene but accompanies. The Shekhinah goes into exile with Israel. She does not prevent catastrophe but refuses to abandon those who suffer it.

This accompanying presence is the theological complement to the eglah arufah's ethic of levaya. The elders are judged not for failing to prevent murder—that may have been beyond their power—but for failing to accompany. Jacob's sin was not that he could not protect Joseph from his brothers but that he sent him without escort into known danger. Our failure on Simchat Torah 2023 was not that we could not stop Hamas—that, too, was beyond our power—but that we were spiritually elsewhere when our brothers and sisters needed us most.

1.3 The Hermeneutic of Sacred Brokenness

Do not rush toward meaning. Sacrifice, heroism, rebirth—the old words circle like relatives who do not know what to say. This ground will not be narrated. It demands a slower faith: unresolved grief, moral ambiguity, the scandal of survival that offers no absolution to the one who walked away.

Geoffrey Hinton, the computer scientist who has warned about existential risks from artificial intelligence, has called for AI systems to develop "maternal instincts"—the capacity to care for vulnerable beings without seeking to control them (31). This call echoes, perhaps unknowingly, the Kabbalistic understanding of the Shekhinah as divine maternal presence (34,43). The Zohar frequently images the Shekhinah as mother, as womb, as the aspect of God that nurtures rather than judges.

What would it mean for our theology—and our communal practice—to develop such instincts? The eglah arufah ritual demands that the community ask: Did we provide food? Did we provide escort? Did we attend to the vulnerable person who passed through our midst? These questions translate into contemporary terms: Did we maintain connection with our Israeli siblings? Did we know where they were on Simchat Torah morning? Did we provide spiritual escort as they journeyed into their celebrations?

The answer is clear. We did not.

Eliezer Berkovits, in his Faith After the Holocaust, argued that God's hiddenness (hester panim) is a function of human freedom: God withdraws to allow human beings to exercise genuine moral agency (28). This "free will defense" has been central to Jewish theodicy since the Shoah. But the defense fails when applied to communal neglect. We were free on Simchat Torah 2023—free to celebrate, free to dance, free to complete the Torah. We exercised our freedom in joy while others were losing theirs in terror.

1.4 The Patient as Sacred Text

In my clinical practice, I have developed what I call "hermeneutic medicine"—an approach that treats patients as sacred texts requiring interpretive wisdom rather than purely technical intervention (35,45). The patient presents not merely symptoms but a narrative, a history, a web of meanings that must be read with care. Diagnosis is not simply identification but

interpretation: what does this symptom mean in the context of this life?

This hermeneutic approach applies to the collective trauma of October 7. The Nova massacre is not simply an event to be catalogued but a text to be interpreted—a text written in blood and fire that demands reading. The Zohar's method of transforming narrative into moral symbol offers a model. Wagons become heifers become accusations become opportunities for repair. What do the burnt cars of the Negev become? What text are the bullet-perforated doors writing?

The Talmudic principle that stones cry out when blood is spilled (Sanhedrin 37a) suggests a kind of material witness: the created world records the crimes committed upon it. The vehicles at the car cemetery near Tekuma are such witnesses. They remember what we would prefer to forget. They testify to what we were doing—and not doing—when the massacre occurred.

My concept of "therapeutic tzimtzum" proposes that the healer must contract—must withdraw ego, must create space—for the patient's healing to emerge (36). This withdrawal is not abandonment but attentive presence: being there without imposing, witnessing without fixing. The opposite of Jacob's failure is not heroic intervention but faithful accompaniment.

1.5 The Spirit Revives, but the Wound Remains

The Zohar concludes its reading of the wagons with the verse: "And when Jacob saw this, his spirit revived" (Genesis 45:27). The Hebrew בקעי חור יחתו suggests resurrection: the spirit that had departed returns. Jacob comes back to life.

Yet we must be careful not to misread this revival as resolution. The Zohar specifies that Jacob's spirit revived "because he knew his son still lived, and he knew the matter could now be repaired" (תנקתיא אתלימ). The possibility of repair (tikkun) is not the completion of repair. Jacob still must journey to Egypt. He still must confront Joseph face to face. Twenty-two years of absence cannot be undone by the sight of wagons, however symbolically laden.

Similarly, the commemorations of October 7 cannot restore what was lost. The faces rising from soil at the Nova memorial site will not return to flesh. The 378 who died at the festival remain dead. The hostages who were taken, those who survived and those who did not, carry wounds that no ritual can fully address.

What the Zohar offers—what post-Holocaust theology in all its forms attempts to provide—is not consolation but recognition. The wagons force Jacob to see what he had done. The burnt cars force us to see what we failed to do. This seeing is painful, but it is also the beginning of repair. One cannot mend what one will not acknowledge is broken.

The vav is broken here. And it will remain broken. Our task is not to pretend otherwise but to learn how to live with sacred incompleteness—to hold the two fragments that will not fuse and to refuse both the false comfort of premature healing and the despair that abandons hope altogether.

The road north bends gently. The sky remains indifferent. We carry nothing we can name. Only this: the earth, burned and planted, danced upon and violated, has written something on the body. It will take years to read. It may take longer to refuse the false translations.

For now, we do not interpret. We only remain a little less whole, a little more present, a fractured letter in a sentence still being written.

For the faces in the field,

for the steel that remembered,

for the doors that did not hold.

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